

A TRANSMEDIA TOOLKIT FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

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MUNCIE, INDIANA

MAY 2021

## **ABSTRACT**

**CREATIVE PROJECT:** A Transmedia Toolkit for Small Businesses

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**DEGREE:** Master of Arts

**COLLEGE:** College of Communication, Information, and Media

**DATE:** May 2021

**PAGES:** 28

In the current market, social media plays a big part in how people shop. Despite the current pervasiveness of social media, it is only in recent years that bigger businesses have begun to use transmedia strategies in their marketing campaigns. However, with accessible digital marketing tools readily available to anyone, businesses of any size can now incorporate these tools into their everyday practices to enhance their brand awareness to their publics. Transmedia strategies can easily be implemented into these everyday practices, and some bigger businesses have already done this. Using transmedia marketing strategies helps brands engage with audiences and result in brand stories that cross multiple platforms. However, there is evidence that small businesses don't have the manpower or enough resources to hire public relations specialists to handle their online presence. The goal of this project is to develop a transmedia

experience that provides small businesses with a branding resource to improve brand presence and awareness online. Teaching business professionals how to use transmedia marketing in a user-friendly way can help them develop novel skills and strategies for brand development. The transmedia marketing tool proposed here is intended to help businesses to strategize their brand identities with audiences and cross-platform storytelling in mind.

*Keywords:* Transmedia, social media, experience map, qualitative interview, user testing, Transmedia toolkit, co-creation session, website design

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### **A Transmedia Toolkit for Small Businesses**

When Shelby Cole and her grandmother Teresa Cole began their first crafting business, they were stumped by where to begin. “I thought Facebook would be the only thing we would need to market ourselves, but after a month it was clear we needed to expand to other platforms,” she said. “We weren’t getting the attention our business needed to thrive” (personal communication, January 13, 2021). This project develops a transmedia marketing toolkit for businesses like Cole’s. Transmedia marketing is the adoption of traditional transmedia storytelling strategies and focusing them on audience engagement. Author of *Design Elements of Transmedia Branding*, Burghardt Tenderich (2013, p. 3) writes:

Transmedia branding can be defined as a communication process in which information about a brand is packaged into an integrated narrative, which is dispersed in unique contributions across multiple media channels for the purpose of creating an interactive and engaging brand experience.

Marketing is life and death for small businesses, but the demands of the Internet age often make the task too daunting for time-strapped entrepreneurs or their employees. Social media influences how people shop (Forbes, 2018), and having a firm hold on a business’s brand identity is essential. Despite the current pervasiveness of social media, it is only in recent years that bigger businesses have begun to use transmedia marketing strategies in their marketing campaigns. However, with accessible digital marketing tools readily available to anyone, businesses of any size can now incorporate these tools into their everyday practices to enhance brand awareness among their publics. Transmedia marketing strategies can easily be implemented into these everyday practices, and some bigger businesses have already done this. “Transmedia marries your brand with your consumers through collaboration and story,” Dr.

Chester Elijah Branch of Regent University, told INC Magazine. Using transmedia storytelling marketing strategies helps brands engage with audiences and results in brand stories that cross multiple platforms. However, there is evidence that small businesses don't have the manpower or enough resources to hire public relations specialists to handle their online presence.

The goal of this project is to develop a transmedia marketing toolkit that provides small businesses with a branding resource to improve brand presence and awareness online. Teaching business professionals how to use transmedia marketing in a user-friendly way can help them develop novel skills and strategies for brand development. The transmedia marketing tool proposed here is intended to help businesses to strategize their brand identities with audiences and cross-platform storytelling in mind. Through the use of qualitative interviews and co-creation sessions I will strive to create a well rounded transmedia marketing toolkit for small business owners. If this project proves to be successful for the subjects involved, it could change marketing and communication strategies for small businesses. The disconnectedness of their advertisement online could transform into one cohesive story across all of their platforms. With increased engagement and interactions across platforms, small businesses could see an increase in revenue. This could translate to established brand awareness and loyal customers.

### **Literature Review**

Stories, like the humans that tell them, evolve. From origins around a campfire with a small tribe, to a multi-platform narrative seen on-screen by millions, storytelling is a central part of human life. Transmedia storytelling is the use of various independent media outlets in order to tell a larger story (Gambarato, 2015). To scholar Henry Jenkins (2003), transmedia storytelling began as a way media companies could design stories that could cross platforms and reach audiences that would interact with those stories. Jenkins (2006) also writes:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best — so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa (pp. 95-96).

Originally transmedia storytelling was a concept used to develop extended media, like film, but new approaches in transmedia storytelling have turned to other forms of media. For example, the use of transmedia storytelling in social media campaigns has become more prominent not only in media companies, but in large company's business strategies. The goal of this literature review is to gain a comprehension of transmedia storytelling and the impact it could have on small businesses.

Transmedia storytelling is reliant on the connection of multiple media channels, and this has provided an opportunity for advertisers to engage in transmedia storytelling. "Transmedia branding recognizes this limitation of mass media, and uses consumers themselves to help solve

it” Tenderich (2014, p.18) writes. Procter & Gamble’s Old Spice released a commercial, The Man Your Man Could Smell Like, for the 2010 Superbowl. The commercial used former NFL player Isaiah Mustafa in a towel promoting the brand’s new body wash. The humorous viral commercial soon gained notable fame, achieving 20 million views on YouTube just three days after it’s premiere, Tenderich adds. After gaining notoriety, Procter & Gamble launched 186 short videos, using Mustafa to respond to interaction made by online communities. Using elements of transmedia storytelling, they created a narrative that spread beyond a thirty second advertisement. Procter & Gamble also gained the all-time most-viewed YouTube brand channel (and, with 170,000 subscribers, YouTube’s top subscription channel), 3,000% increase in Twitter followers, and a 2,000% increase in Google searches, Tenderich notes.

Storytelling is a key feature in advertising. A powerful story across multiple platforms can attract consumers into a brand. Transmedia storytelling, digital media, and engagement are all features of a discipline called public relations. “The strength of the public relations practice has always been the ability to engage audiences and negotiate relationships—mostly via media relations” (Tenderich). The implementation of transmedia storytelling helps marketers center a brand on a story, whether that is the brand’s origin story, a story that illustrates ethos, a tale of rising popularity, or others. The framework of public relations transmedia storytelling provides a set of techniques that help to reach and engage a mass audience. “Transmedia allows brands a larger canvas in which to tell their story by leveraging the best features in each platform to enhance every piece of the experience; giving diversity and richness to the content and characters and helping users get the most out of a great story” (Jarkus & Zubcić pg. 97).



## Media Toolkits

The online media toolkits, Sprout and BuzzSumo, helped inform the design of this project. Sprout (<https://sproutsocial.com>) is dedicated to social media management, and creating online interest with customers. As a paid platform, Sprout offers business strategies and insights on social trends, and lessons in publishing, tone, and engagement. The design of the Sprout website presents a functional model for this project. According to Sprout's case studies, they tend to work with larger companies with larger budgets like Rover, Telfer School of Management, Indiana University, and the Chicago Bulls. Each one of these companies use one aspect of Sprout to develop their brand. For example, Benefit Cosmetics uses Sprout for analytics while Indiana University uses the community management lessons within the website. While Sprout's client base is large companies, it could be scaled to accommodate small businesses. Pulling from the blog styled post of the website, lessons on content strategy, content planning, and brand toning can be created for users. Though Sprout focuses on social media strategies and telling clients how to successfully navigate social media in particular, these lessons can be translated into transmedia marketing.

BuzzSumo (<https://buzzsumo.com/>) is a website which allows its user to look at trending topics across all social media platforms. Following trends and buzzwords BuzzSumo helps its users to analyze what draws in an audience. By tracking the biggest brands BuzzSumo builds data on what trends they are following and how it is positive or negatively affecting said business. Another aspect of the website is keywords. Emphasizing the values of keywords, BuzzSumo uses tracking software for users to explore specific words and how frequently they are searched. Like Sprout, BuzzSumo services sits behind a paywall.

Both Sprout and BuzzSumo are established platforms that present small businesses with marketing toolkits. These toolkits focus on various aspects of marketing, but do not guide small businesses in how to deploy them into everyday practice. This project seeks to fill that gap..

### **Small Business and Social Media**

According to the Small Business Administration, 99.7% of all employers are small businesses (2011). In a study of small businesses' presence on social media, Tanejia and Toombs (2014) found that 45% of small business owners expected their social media presence to lead to increased profit. Baird and Parasnis (2011) found that most businesses are using social media in hopes to increase customer loyalty, but the reality is that their consumers will only be loyal to businesses if they use social media in a way that engages them. In their final survey, Baird and Parasnis found that 70% of business owners believe reaching out to customers via social media will help them reinforce customer loyalty. However, their studies with consumers found that most consumers don't just want promotions on their social media feeds but rather want interactions with the company instead.

Transmedia storytelling is an important aspect of bringing brand awareness to a largely online audience. The goal of this literature review was to understand how transmedia storytelling and small businesses can form a beneficial relationship. Literature evidence suggests that there is an advantage to applying the transmedia storytelling pillars to business communication strategies. Transmedia storytelling works in the advertising space, creating an engaging content that brings an audience. Looking next at the state of the art will justify the need for a comprehensive lesson in transmedia for small business owners that will strengthen their businesses.

### **Project Design**

This project was guided by the following question: How might transmedia storytelling principles be used for small businesses? To address this question, I examined the literature to understand transmedia and strides to incorporate them in marketing in company's big and small, did qualitative interviews with eight small business owners, conducted separate co-creation sessions with two small business owners, and created an experience map to decipher what small business owners were thinking while developing marketing strategies. This project seeks to build an environment that is accessible for digital users at every level. In order to create a user-centered design for this project, the target users needed to participate in the design process.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

Eight business owners were interviewed to understand how they cultivated their brands in online spaces and what they wished to get from an online presence. These eight business owners came from three industries: one from retail, two from food, and five from creative businesses. These business owners were at different stages of the development of their businesses; some had just opened their doors, while others were well established in their communities. Each business owner was interviewed separately in 30- to 45-minute intervals with 20 questions with two yes or no, and 18 open ended. Participants were interviewed on both the topics of their previous transmedia storytelling knowledge and their own marketing strategies. In addition, they were asked to explain their process of developing a media plan — if they had one at all — and to describe what would make it easier for them to create one.

### **Experience Map**

The qualitative interviews produced a lot of information for this project. An experience map was created in order to digest all the information that was provided by the participants. This

would help to identify the problem for business owners and how this project could potentially fix it. To analyze this information, I compiled all of the data that was collected during each interview session, and created a map which represents how the participants thought about creating marketing strategies.

<b>TOUCHPOINT</b>	User creates plan for marketing that week	User is unsure what kind of content they should post	User creates a social presences without cohesive branding
<b>USER THOUGHTS</b>	User post every once in a while hoping to their audience with pay attention	User post only one platform because they are use to that platform	User is not overly involved in social media platforms and does not think it is a problem
<b>PAIN POINTS</b>	User posts content irregularly	User is only getting 2-5 likes, and shares on their content	The inconsistent branding leads to lack of brand recognition.
<b>IDEAS TO IMPROVE</b>	Provide User with a guide to create content on a regular bases	Demonstrate why multiple platform usage can provide a larger audience to businesses	Create simple step by step tutorial on creating brand aesthetic

**Figure 1. User Experience Map.** Above is the user experience map that highlights how small business owners are using social media platforms, and the points that could improve their experience on said platforms.

### Co-Creation Prototype

Two participants assisted in a co-creation session to determine what small business owners needed from this project. The value of a co-creation session is best summed up by Christian Gronroos, "...Although customers are in charge of their value creation and fundamentally are the value creators, during direct interactions, provided that the firm makes use of the opportunities of such an interactive process, the firm also co-creates value with the customers" (2011, p. 290). From the previous round of interviews, everyone was invited to participate in the co-creation session, and two agreed. Over the forty-five-minute-long session, a low-fidelity prototype was created based on the needs of the two participants. The prototype

would take the form of a website in which users could come and form media plans and strategies for their business, regardless of what industry they were in. The prototype consisted of basic blog styled posts that would inform the reader about transmedia storytelling principles such as: spreadability vs drillability, continuity vs multiplicity, immersion vs extractability, worldbuilding, and seriality (Jenkins, 2013). A quiz which leads users to one of two media plans that they would best, based on the results of their quiz, benefit from. At the end of the session the pair of participants reiterated their favorite ideas. They discussed how they thought the idea would benefit not only their business but others as well.

## Representation of the Project

### Qualitative Interviews

It was important to keep small business owners as the focus of each design element within the website, understanding that owning and running a small business can be strenuous and overwhelming. Each individual interviewee reported that they were looking for an easy guide to manage their marketing strategies, tips for gaining a wider audience, and ways to cater content to their established audience. The key responses to these interviews are as follows:

- *What social platform is preferred:* Five participants preferred Facebook, two participants preferred Instagram, and one participant preferred Twitter.
- *How much time do you dedicate to the marketing of your small business:* Four participants spent two to three hours a week on marketing, two participants spent one hour a day on marketing, two participants worked on marketing continuously every day of the week.
- *Things to consider:* three participants said the busy schedule of small business owners, three participants said their lack of knowledge on transmedia storytelling, and two participants said limited skill sets.
- *Are you aware what transmedia storytelling is:* only three out of the eight small business owners interviewed knew of transmedia storytelling.

With the two participants that were aware of transmedia storytelling, I explored what goes into a small business owner's marketing strategies, and how transmedia storytelling can be useful in everyday practice.

#### Questions and response

1. *What do you think transmedia storytelling can accomplish for your business?*

“Transmedia storytelling is such a connective tool that I use often to find new clients. It allows my business to go into different spaces and find that audience who is looking for a business like mine.” (Participant 1).

2. *Why do you think other small businesses aren't using transmedia storytelling in their marketing strategies?* “I think it's fear of the unknown. It's this wonderful technique, but for someone who doesn't grasp the concept it can be intimidating” (Participant 2). “They don't know what it is. I see businesses using bits and pieces of transmedia storytelling everyday. It's not a resistance to the idea of transmedia storytelling, but a lack of understanding” (Participant 1).

3. *How can we persuade small business owners into using transmedia storytelling pillars?*

“By showing small business owners the effectiveness of transmedia storytelling. Giving them examples of the success of these strategies can give them incentive to incorporate transmedia storytelling” (Participant 2).

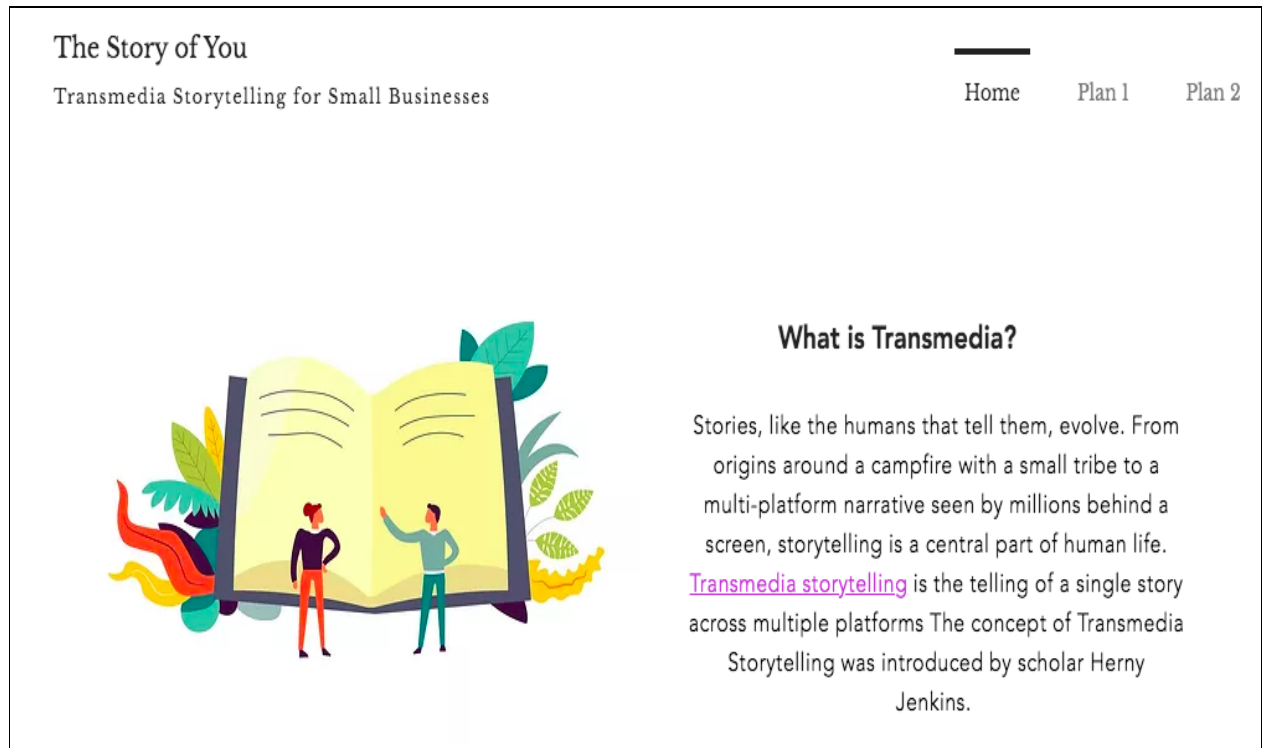
#### **First Prototype: User Testing**

Individual participants were asked at the end of the session where they would seek information about transmedia storytelling strategies for their business. Several of the participants

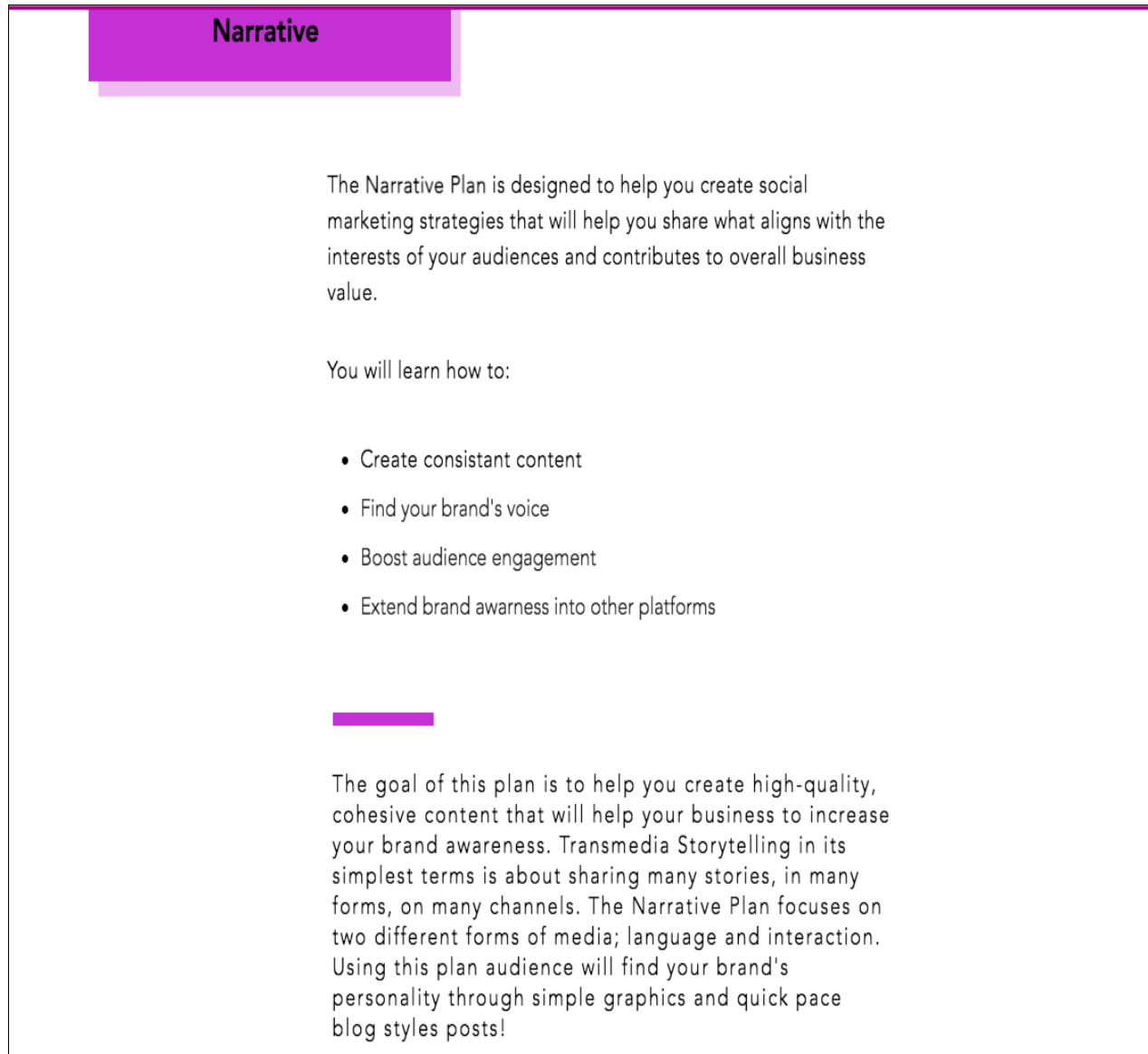
suggested a website that would house all the information they would need to create a marketing strategy around transmedia storytelling.

The first prototype was built according to the participant wish list. This website contains information on what transmedia storytelling is, and two action plans for users. This first prototype is focused on relaying Jenkins' (2013) principles of transmedia storytelling (i.e., spreadability, continuity, seriality, etc.) to the user through text and graphics. The homepage gives an introduction into the basics of transmedia storytelling, and encourages self exploration through links to YouTube videos on the subject. At the top of the page are links to plan one and Plan two. These plans are formulated to fit small business owners looking to accomplish two different things using transmedia storytelling. plan one is focused on narrative. The goal of this plan is to help the user to create cohesive content that will help their business to increase brand awareness by focusing on two different forms of media; language and interaction. This plan engages text platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. plan two is focused on visual storytelling. This plan engages visual media — Tik Tok, YouTube, Pinterest, and Instagram — for small business owners to connect with customers. While plan one looks at steps to find brand voice, and tips for consistent schedule content, plan two provides users with a guide to brand aesthetic and tutorials for graphics.

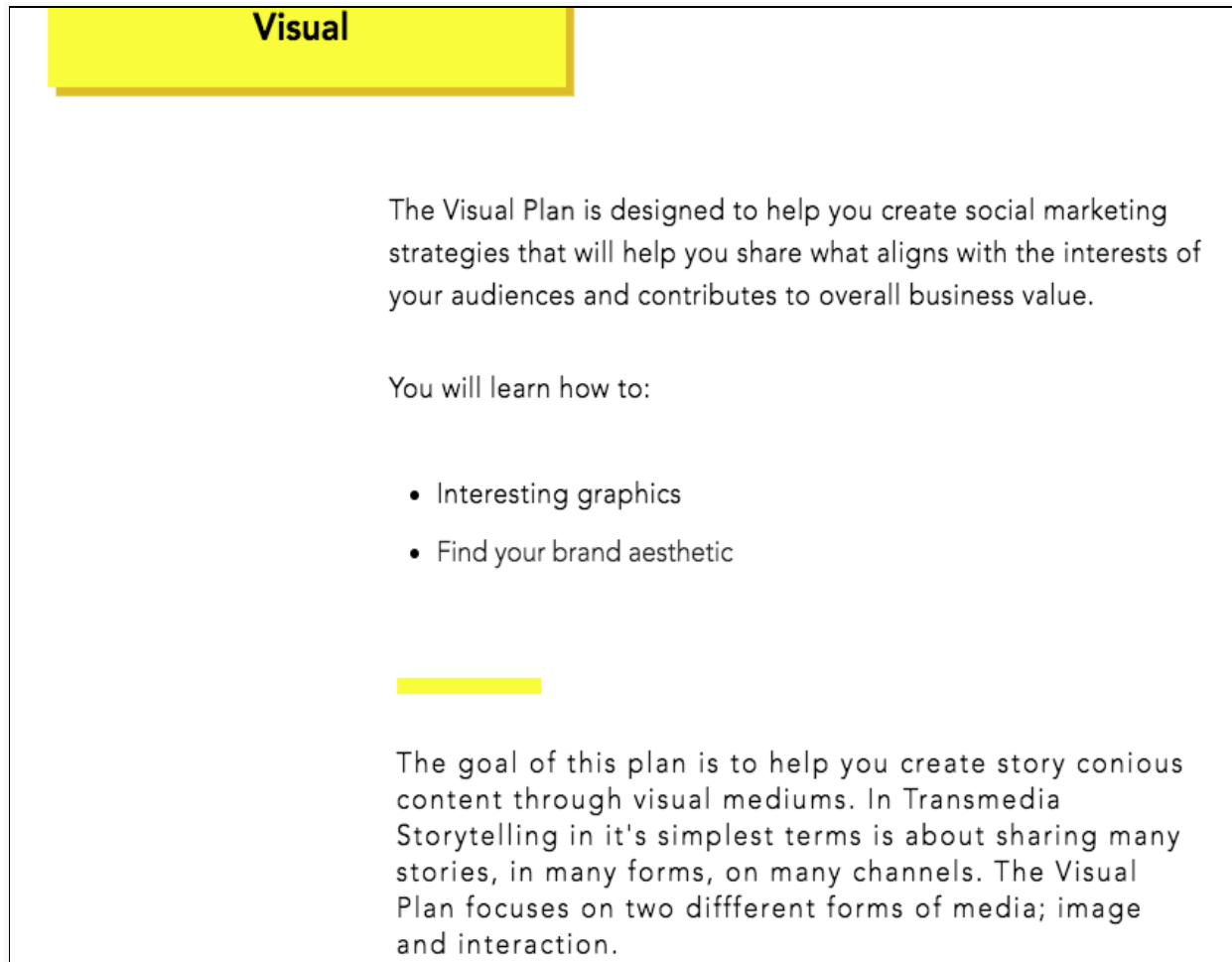




**Figure 2. First Web Prototype Image 1.** Above is the home page for the website. This page contains the basic information of transmedia storytelling. The words highlighted and underlined “Transmedia Storytelling” is a link to Henry Jenkins’ 2010 Ted Talk on transmedia storytelling and his research on success of social-networking websites.



**Figure 3. First Web Prototype Image 2.** Above is the image of the “Plan one” page. This page is the narrative plan. After a brief explanation of what this plan is designed to do, it lays out the focus points for this plan. Through minimalist design, the information on this prototype is the focal point.



**Figure 4. First Web Prototype Image 3.** Above is the image of the “Plan two” page. This page holds the information for users looking into the visual aspect of transmedia storytelling. This page focuses on helping users with Visual platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Tik Tok.

### **First Prototype Results**

For user testing, four of the original eight participants came back to review the first prototype of the website. These users were asked to explore the website for 10 minutes on their own and then provide feedback on the design and usability of the website. In a guided group session, the four participants discussed points of usability, efficiency, and design. Half of the participants found the overall layout of the design sufficient but boring. While the other half needed more context as to what transmedia storytelling and how to apply it to their practice. The group was asked what improvements should be made to the website. One of the participants liked the links to YouTube videos and would have liked to see that incorporated throughout. Another suggested an item, such as a quiz, to help identify which plan users should look into. Their feedback was key to the development of the second prototype.

### **Second Prototype: The Story of You Web Page**

Once user testing was complete, I compiled and analyzed the data collected from that session. Recognizing the common themes from the session, I redesigned the elements that were causing issues in the first prototype. Participants noted that the homepage was overly wordy and didn't encourage the users to explore the rest of the website. Another suggestion for the homepage from participants was to simplify the transmedia storytelling explanation on the homepage as the information was also available in both plans. For the plan pages the participants recommended examples be added, and information elaborated. The second prototype was developed with this feedback in mind. Site design, use of graphics, and information depth were improved.

In the development of the second prototype, a quiz, originally suggested in the co-creation session, was added with a revised explanation paragraph on transmedia storytelling

to help users to determine which plan to explore. The quiz is made up of ten questions which help users to determine which plan would fit their business the best. The quiz gives users a possible score of 60, with a range of 1 to 30 points directing them to plan one, and 31 to 60 points sending them to plan two. Each question offers two possible two answers. Each answer has a number correlating it with one plan or the other. If the user answered more questions that would show a benefit from plan one, the total score would be lower. There is no connection to score and need or quality; it is simply a sorting method. For example, in one question the user is asked which social media they prefer to use. They can choose from the options: Twitter, Facebook, Tik Tok, and Instagram. Each choice is correlated with a numerical value of either five or six. Tik Tok and Instagram are given the value of six, because they both are related to the values of the second plan. While Facebook and Twitter are given the value of five, because they related to the first plan. Both plan pages were updated with additional information and example posts for users. The design of the second prototype is more functional and user friendly for the target audience.

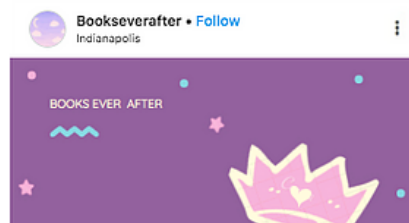


**Figure 5. Quiz.** This ten-question quiz helps users to determine which plan they should follow. Once the quiz is completed users are given a score that will direct them to either plan one or two. While the user is free to use either plan, the quiz offers the plan most suited to their needs.

## Examples

So, what should your posts look like? Using the combined steps above you should have the aesthetic, content type, and consistent schedule down. Now you have to figure out where to start posting. I recommend taking an hour or two out of a weekend to plan the content for your business for the next couple of weeks.

Here is an example of what your transmedia storytelling strategy could look like:



**Figure 6. Example.** Each plan offers an example section to give insight to what their content can look like. Each plan highlights different types of content on several different social media platforms.

### **Discussion**

This project provides access to transmedia principles and strategies for small business owners to incorporate in their everyday marketing. In the internet age, any brand can find its niche audience. Finding a cohesive brand voice and design on all platforms is the key to success (Forbes, 2012). Most newly created businesses go through the process of creating a brand identity and marketing themes. Being a small business owner can be overwhelming, and for those who don't have access to marketing strategies it can be hard to figure out where to start among the hundreds of other tasks required to make a small business float.

The website gives small business owners access to concise, clear, and approachable logic for creating marketing strategies that expand across multiple media forms and channels. Whereas most online media toolkits are broad in scope and narrow on plans, this model for transmedia marketing strives to put simple starting plans within reach, no matter the experience of the new small business owner or staff member. Each plan on the website informs small business owners how to implement transmedia brand identity, brand aesthetic, content type, and social media plans. Plan One uses a narrative model to lead small business owners through comprehensive steps on how to create brand identity. Plan Two focuses on the visual model, focusing on visual social platforms like Instagram and Tiktok. Both stress consistent posting and audience engagement, and together will prove valuable in creating a well-rounded perspective on transmedia marketing.

The first prototype resulted from qualitative interviews, a co-creation session, and user experience mapping. The qualitative interviews helped to create insight into what small business owners need from a media toolkit. The co-creation provided insight on how the website should function for other small businesses' benefit. Design thinking helped to discover the pain points



small business owners were having when creating marketing strategies. By taking the data collected from the qualtitives I found a pattern of discomfort in creating content. In the early stages of this project, finding different perspectives from small business owners was key to gaining a better understanding of the experiences of small business owners and how this project could help them. Once the first prototype was created, design thinking sessions informed improvements of it. The second prototype was designed to implement these feedback suggestions, improve the aesthetic design, and add additional information to both action plans. Small business owners, startups, and entrepreneurs at the beginning of their marketing and branding process can employ the user-designed quiz. This will help them to discover transmedia marketing strategies described in either or both of the user co-created transmedia branding plans available.

Similar case research showed a lack of transmedia marketing toolkits available to the public. Sprout, which helped to inform the design of the website, is a paid toolkit. Sprout's large-business focus is evident in extensive writings on the importance of analytics, networking with influencers, and content diversity. It does not serve small business owners with limited time and budget well. Its paywall limits access for those needing affordable options to help their businesses.

### **Limitations and Further Work**

Due to COVID-19 and the stress it has added to the lives of small business owners, my ability to deploy and test a full campaign design was severely limited. Though a new round of testing has been delayed, data collected from participants indicates this transmedia marketing toolkit could yield positive results for small business owners. One participant who was aware of transmedia branding during the qualitative interview said, "Using some of the transmedia

marketing in my own business has been a unique experience. Implementing transmedia (marketing) sets you apart from competitors. Your audience is getting an experience that not many other businesses offer” (personal communication, October 28, 2020).

As the current pandemic hopefully subsides in coming months, I hope to test the latest prototype in collaboration with two new small businesses to understand its effectiveness and what might need further improvement. This will include a two-month period of scheduled content creation for both businesses. Each will be dedicated to two plans within the transmedia toolkit, with results tracking as available from their efforts. In the final design of the website it will incorporate the media plans used in the study and resulting statistics as an example for other business owners. Furthermore, in future work the quiz could provide a good basis for research on transmedia storytelling and marketing. By validating the quiz, and through continuing testing of it, it could deliver results with higher fidelity and the creation of more plans for users who don’t fit neatly into the current two.

## **Conclusion**

Being from a small community I have witnessed first-hand the impact a small business can have on a community and its people. When disaster strikes a community, small businesses open their doors to provide for those in need. Their donations to local schools and their offering of a helping hand help better the next generation. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (2019), there are 30.2 million small businesses across the U.S. Approximately 70% of those businesses are owned and operated by a single person. Being a small business owner is not easy. In the age of digital media, however, any brand can find its customers so long as it has the time and tools to rise above the noise. It’s easy for big companies like Procter & Gamble, Coca Cola, and Disney to incorporate transmedia storytelling into their marketing

strategies. These companies all have money, staff, and resources to invest into these transmedia marketing strategies. Small business owners cannot afford those same resources, and to small business owners transmedia storytelling might seem like a concept that is only within reach of large, complex organizations. But transmedia marketing principles and practice can be put to use by the smallest of businesses, and this toolkit is designed to make them more accessible. This project provides a small business like the Cole's, described in the introduction., with a start in the right direction. "Every one of our crafts are made with love, and each has a story behind them. We want to start that with as many people as we can" (personal communication, January 13, 2021).

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